



Lt. Jim McCormack, Indianapolis Fire Dept.

Searching For A Firefighter

One of the most difficult task assignments during a fireground emergency is searching for a lost or missing firefighter! Organized chaos is the term that may best describe this operation. Adrenaline will be flowing, to say the least, and emotions will be difficult to control. Discipline is a must. Training is the key to making this a successful operation.

When searching for a missing firefighter everyone seems to forget the basics! Here are a few points to consider when faced with this difficult assignment.

- **Use a Systematic Search!**
Don't let emotions control the event. Sure, you'll probably use a combination of search techniques to find the firefighter - but the foundation of the search will be based on basic search and rescue skills. Remember the basics!
- **Remember, Speed is Critical.**
This goes without saying - but it's often overlooked. Conducting a primary search for a civilian is not the same as conducting a search for a missing firefighter. For starters, you know when the firefighter got there and the probable location he may be in. Don't forget it must still be a thorough, systematic, search!
- **Perform a Search Size Up**
Get as much information as possible before and during, the search. If you're a member of the RIT then this RECON is part of your fireground assignment. Consider some of the following pieces of information.
- **Who are you looking for?**
This is an important piece of information for a few reasons. One obvious reason is that the person may not be missing (it's happened)! Another reason is that it may help identify the location, or possible location, of the firefighter. How aggressive is the person? How competent is the person? How fast does the person move inside structures under these conditions? It may be possible to answer some of these questions and help determine a probable location.
- **What was the assignment?**
What was the missing firefighter doing? Attack? Ventilation? Search and rescue? Knowing the assignment and combining that with the building type, the location and extent of the fire, the probable location of occupants, and overall fireground conditions (visibility issues, known hazards, etc.) it may be possible to narrow down the search area.

- ***What's happening on the fireground?***

Are conditions improving? Are they getting worse? Has any progress been made since the first units arrived? All these questions will give an indication of the conditions that may have led to the problem. The information gained will assist in developing the search plan.

- ***Have a Plan***

Searching for a firefighter, as stated above, will be one of the most difficult assignments of your career. How will the search be conducted? How many are in the search team? Who's the leader? What is each member responsible for? Who's responsible for knowing the way out? Who will maintain contact with Command? Does the search end when the firefighter is found or will someone search for the closest exit? What is the procedure if the search party gets split up? Who's responsible for keeping the search team intact? The list goes on.

Search Techniques

Searching for a missing firefighter will draw from all previous fireground skills and training, guaranteed! Some of the following techniques, coupled with basic search and rescue skills, may assist in locating the missing firefighter.

- ***Conventional Right-/Left-Hand Search***

This is basic search and rescue and will be the foundation of the firefighter search. Some of the other techniques listed below may allow you to minimize the use of the right-/left-hand pattern but there will be times during the search that it will be used.

- ***PASS Device Assisted Search***

When searching for an activated PASS device the search team may be able to move quicker throughout the structure. The basic concept of this search is that the team listens for, and moves toward, the activated PASS. This is easier said than done when all the other fireground noises are included. This is not a search by committee! Listening for and moving toward the PASS is a difficult task to say the least. One member of the search team must be responsible for determining the direction of travel. Stop, listen and move. As the sound of the PASS gets louder, you know your team is getting closer to the downed firefighter.

- ***Radio-Assisted Search***

If the missing firefighter is equipped with a radio, and the radio is turned on (volume up), it may be possible to create an improvised alerting device. How? By keying two portable radios close together a squelching sound is created on other radios. The search team may be able to stop, turn all radios down, key two radios together and listen for the squelching sound created. Difficult? Yes! Will it work? Maybe! Is it worth a shot? You bet!

- ***Rope-Assisted Search***

When talking about rope-assisted searches there are usually two discussions personal search rope and team or large-area search.

Personal search ropes may assist the search team by allowing members to quickly branch off to search areas where members can't keep in contact. By incorporating a search rope - that tethers members back to the main search party - the entire search team doesn't have to move in that direction.

Team search involves a complete rope-based search system. The concept involves a main search line, controlled by the lead person, and individual (personal) search lines of a known length that become appendages to the main line. A half-moon search pattern, off of the main line, is used by the searching firefighters to cover the area being searched.

Thermal Camera-Assisted Search

Thermal cameras give back some of the vision that smoke takes away - but not all of it! When searching for a missing firefighter, as with the other techniques, a thermal camera may help in determining the direction to take. One benefit that the other methods don't provide is the ability to see the firefighter from a distance - a distinct advantage of the camera. If a firefighter is missing and there is a thermal camera on the fireground it should be used to assist in the search - no matter what other task it may be performing! **Training**

Let's face it, fireground search is an important part of all fireground operations - but it's the most important part when there is a firefighter missing! How you train is how you'll perform. There's only one acceptable outcome in the search and it is tied directly to training.

- ***Build a Solid Foundation.***

Continually practice basic fireground search and rescue skills. Conventional right- and left-handed search techniques are a must. The level of difficulty must constantly be increased during the training program.

- ***Include Realistic Fireground Problems.***

The training setting should provide anything that the fireground setting may provide. Including but not limited to: Noise, obstacles, stress, limited visibility, smoke and heat.

Building an effective search and rescue prop isn't difficult - it simply requires a little creativity and a lot of fireground thought. Don't hold back during training if you expect performance during an emergency. Excuses are excuses, nothing more!

Plan the Search, Search the Plan!

It would be great if all firefighters were equipped with integrated PASS devices, but they're not. It would be great if all firefighters turned their PASS devices on, but they don't. It would be great if all firefighters could be pinpointed on the fireground and we didn't have to expend time and effort searching for them, but they can't (economically!). In a true missing firefighter emergency use any and all means to locate the missing firefighter - Plan the Search, Search the Plan!

Jim McCormack has been a firefighter for 15 years and is currently with the Indianapolis Fire Department. Jim is also the founder and president of the [Fire Department Training Network](#), a membership network dedicated to firefighter training.